19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

on a low table. The pile of rice on the tray looks like a heap of snow. The curries or condiments are placed beside the tray in small cups. The members of the family usually eat together. If there are guests the women often wait, either to serve in case the supply needs replenishing, or because they are shy about eating with strangers.

In addition to attending to their domestic cares, the women take their place beside the men in the fields. It should not be forgotten, however, that the latter can cook and perform the work usually assigned to women more readily than men in the West can. In the field the women and girls assist in the sowing, planting, and transplanting of rice on the plains, as well as in the reaping, threshing, etc., doing their full share along with the men. They tend the cotton and vegetables and carry the greater part of the paddy to the storage-bins and from these to their homes. The only work I have seen men doing that I have never observed being done by women is plowing.

The women mingle in the village gatherings and take part in the wedding and funeral festivities, their share in the latter being specially prominent.[2] Their position in their own families depends largely on their personal character. If they possess strong personalities, they gain considerable prestige and exercise influence accordingly. The older they grow the more conservative they become, and not infrequently the opinions of a grandmother will keep a whole family from bettering its condition by engaging in some new occupation. The Karen grandmother holds the first place in the family at the "Bgha" feast, when all of the members are gathered together. She is then the "Bgha a' hko." This peculiar position of hers has been discussed in the chapter on Feasts to the "Bgha."[3] Its religious significance is remarkable and may be a relic of matriarchal government, which is still found in Tibet. But it does not appear to have any effect on the social position of the sex, except in so far as it prevents the younger members of the family, both men and women, from breaking with the religious and social traditions of their forefathers.

In the olden days three classes of people were condemned "to live without the camp." These were cohabiting couples who had not complied with the marriage rites, widows, and orphans. A couple whose union had been formed without the performance and

[2] See Chapter XX, p. 282.
[3] See Chapter XXIV, pp. 248, 249.

19: Marshall M-6 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

B. The Bwe Sacrifice

782
796
The Sgaw offer their great sacrifice in January.[4] The Bwe, however, make their offering in July when the paddy is well started. They sacrifice one hog in a central spot of the village lands, first erecting a booth under a eugenia tree, which they consider sacred. Four elders act as priests, their functions being herediatary.[5] Each man cuts three bamboos, one to represent a post of his paddy-bin and the other two to show the height he wants the grain to be in his bin. Then he makes a miniature bin, a long pen, a trap, and a snare. When the people assemble, only the most prosperous elders sit with the priests in the booth. No women are allowed to be present. [562]

782
The leader takes a sprig from a eugenia tree and raises it in his clasped hand to heaven and prays, the others doing likewise. The leader then spears the hog; and, when the blood flows, all seize their bamboos and cry out: "May my paddy be as high as these bamboos." Some declare that they have caught many rats in their traps and others that they have snared many wild fowls, in proof of their purpose to protect the growing grain. Others dance and shout, while some beat gongs or blow bamboo pipes.

783
The hog is then carried to the village to be cooked. Each man also provides a fowl. When all the food has been prepared, it is brought back to the booth; and, after a prayer much like that quoted above, they set out the food but eat none of it. On their way back to the village they dance and sing and spend the night in revelry. Next morning they return to the booth, and the priests begin to eat of the food left there, all being allowed to partake; but any one who considers himself unholy must not eat, for the food is sacred. Not only persons guilty of immoral conduct, but also men whose wives are pregnant are under tabu.

782
After the feast, when they have again danced their way back to the village, the chiefs draw two joints of water for each family and carry them into the village. The families are then called out on their verandas and each family group, including the women and children, is sprinkled with water from one of the joints brought for it. The other is carried to the field next morning by the head of

[4] So far as I have been able to ascertain, it seems to have been many years since one of these great sacrifices has been observed by the Sgaw Karen of Lower Burma. I have been able to get no contemporary accounts of such a ceremony. As to the length of time since the Bwe have held such a sacrifice, I can give no definite information.

[5] See p. 247 on priests among the Bwe.

19: Marshall M-6 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

whole family. She is the "Bgha a' hko." This custom seems to hark back to the matriarchal stage of development among the Karen, as also does the fact that the groom goes to live with the bride's family. Why a woman should hold the place of honor at the "Bgha" feast has been "explained" to me in two ways, namely, (1) that a female was the first person to fall under the influence of "Mū kaw li" (Satan) in the orchard, and (2) that as the woman is the more susceptible to sickness, she properly has more to do with the offerings and should take the leading part in making them. The Karen maintain that the elders are responsible for these explanations and that the ceremonial of the "Bgha" feast has come down from time immemorial.

There are three kinds of "Bgha" feasts. The most familiar kind is that observed by the members of the immediate family when one of their number has fallen sick, in case divination shows that his illness is due to his having offended the "Bgha." In such a case the family must at once join in a feast. The second kind of feast is that observed as a preventive of possible sickness and as a means of keeping on good terms with the "Bgha." This is known as "ta aw bwaw a' tha" (eating to strengthen one's heart). The third kind of feast is that participated in by all the kindred, when the most elaborate rites are celebrated. Such a feast is called "ta aw saw ke saw na." While there is a general resemblance among the feasts held all over the Karen country, the various tribes and even parts of the same tribe differ in the details of their observances.

In the case of an illness found by divination to be due to the "Bgha," the ceremonial of the feast among the Sgaw Karen of the Tharrawaddy district and in the Pegu Hills, is as follows: After a pot of rice has been set on the fire to boil, a fowl is caught and killed, and its feathers are burned off in the fireplace. It is then cut up and cooked with salt and a chili and placed on the table or family tray. The father, mother, and children in the order of their ages severally partake of a morsel, after which they eat their meal together. If the parents of the father and mother are living, the feast is held in the morning; but if they are dead, it is held in the afternoon. On the following morning a pig is caught, brought into the house, and its legs are tied together. It is then killed by strangulation or by wrenching the neck, care being taken not to break any of its bones or bruise its skin lest some of its blood should be spilled. The body of the pig is then run through lengthwise on

19: Marshall M-6 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

length, some plantain leaves, and a pole long enough to serve as a spit for the pig. He cuts one of the bamboo pieces into two sections in which to cook the rice and curry, and splits the other bamboo into withes. After the rice has been cooked, the mother mixes a little of it with chaff, puts some of it in a small pot and a lump of it on top of the pot, besides sprinkling water on the fireplace.

A Sgaw Karen Grandmother

Later the lump of chaff and rice is used as a bait in catching the pig that is to become the offering. Two withes of the outside and two of the inside of the bamboo are used in tying the feet of the animal, and one more of each kind to bind the feet together. Other withes are wound around the snout, one turn being passed through the mouth, which is thus closed securely. The pig is now carried into the house and laid on plantain leaves spread on the floor, a winnowing-tray being placed in front of it along with the

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

pot of rice and chaff and a small bamboo cup ("maw"). Three times in succession the father touches first the pig and then the pot with the tips of his fingers, while addressing the "Bgha" as follows: "Avert all sickness from me. Let me be well and live a long life. I am feeding you with pork. Therefore, help me." The same petition is uttered as the other members of the family touch the pig in their turn. The father then strikes the animal three times with his "xeh" and stabs it thrice with a knife, but not to a greater depth than the width of four fingers. The killing of the pig is completed by binding its snout in a wet cloth to smother it and by wrenching its neck. The withes are now removed from its feet, and the carcass is carried to another part of the room and washed. After being laid again on the plantain leaves, an opening is made in its belly for the purpose of examining the gall-bladder. If this organ is plump, the omen is favorable and the feast may proceed. Otherwise, another pig must be sacrificed on the following day, and if necessary another, until a gall-bladder is found that meets the required conditions.

A satisfactory offering having been obtained, the intestines are removed and the carcass is impaled lengthwise on the sharpened stick brought from the jungle, and the bristles are burned off at a new fireplace built for the feast in the inner room of the house. After the body is washed it is butchered: first the head and stabbed shoulder being cut off in one piece, then the hind leg on the same side, next the fore and hind legs on the other side. The carcass is now opened down the front and down the middle of the back, the side that was stabbed being first removed and prepared. The wife puts the currypot on to boil, while her husband cuts up the meat, including the heart, liver, and lungs, some of which is dropped into one of the bamboo joints over the top of which a plantain leaf is tied. The other bamboo joint is filled with rice, and both vessels are set over the fire and watched carefully to prevent burning. However, the vessels must not be removed from the fire before their contents are thoroughly cooked, else the offering would be offensive to the "Bgha."

The rest of the pork is cooked in the currypot, which the wife has set on the fire. The wife must clean out the intestines, which she does outside the house. When she brings them in, the husband brushes off any ashes that may be on the top of the little pot and covers the mouth of it with a plantain leaf. He makes

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

little holes in the covering and inserts short pieces of bamboo down into the pot obliquely, so as to hold the cover on. He then pours water in through these holes. He now makes a sort of standard, called "thi keh," out of a strip of bamboo. The bamboo is split into three strips, but not entirely separated. They are bound together at three points with withes, and then the two outer ones are broken between the bindings but only enough to make them stand out like arms akimbo. The lower ends of each of the side strips are bent out and then brought back and inserted in a hole, or under the lowest withe around the stock. This is set in the pot. What the significance of this is, neither my informant could tell me, nor do the reference books help one to find the meaning of it.

When the food has been cooked, the husband empties the rice on one tray and the pork on another; and the members of the family—father, mother, and the children in succession according to their ages—each take a morsel from both trays. Then the father takes a swallow from a pot containing water or liquor, being followed by the others in due order. He also pours out two cups of the liquid for the ancestors of the family and throws the rest away. He collects into a bundle the withes used in tying the feet of the pig and hangs it on the end of one of the floor joists at the rear of the house. Finally, he washes his hands and returns to join his family in finishing the feast.

In case the grandparents are living, they are summoned to the "Bgha" feast and arrive on the evening preceding the event. After breakfast next morning the preparations are made much the same as described above, but include the providing of three little bamboo cups ("maw") and the construction of a tiny model of a house ("hi hpo hkeh") about a foot long, which is set in front of the pig and in which the favorable gall-bladder of the animal is placed, together with its heart and the lung and kidney of the side that has been stabbed. The organs of the other side and any blood remaining in the abdominal cavity are placed on a tray. Only the flesh of the stabbed side is used at once. While it is cooking, the wife pounds some rice, moistened with a little water, until it is reduced to fine flour. Two of the cups are filled with a mixture of this flour, chopped pork, and a little blood, and hung over the fire to cook. The wife washes the intestines of the animal, while her husband arranges the "thi keh" as before and dishes out the food for the family. When all is ready each member of the household partakes of a morsel and

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

782 753 755 796 787

sip of liquor, the grandfather and grandmother coming after the children. This ceremonial being completed, all eat together. In the afternoon the intestines are cooked and eaten. Next morning the husband removes the heart, lung, and kidney from the miniature house, cuts them up, and cooks them. These are eaten, the room is cleaned, the little house is thrown away, the grandparents return home, and the sick person for whom the feast has been held is supposed to recover.

In some places the intestines of the pig and the blood-stained plantain leaves are put in a basket and hung on a tree in the jungle as an offering to "Thi Hko Mü Xa," the lord of the demons.

782 602

The second kind of "Bgha" feast is not preceded by divination. It is held not to cure sickness in the family, but to prevent it. When one of the parents begins to worry lest illness may visit the family, the "Bgha" is feasted and venerated and the hearts of the family are thus strengthened, as they express it. Hence, this feast is called "Ta aw bwaw a' tha." The ceremonial does not differ from that described above.[1]

The third kind of feast is that in honor of the great "Bgha," in which all the kindred by blood participate. It is, therefore, called the feast of the whole family ("ta aw saw ke aaw na"). The eldest female of the family, the grandmother if living, or if not her eldest daughter or granddaughter, presides as chief priestess or head of the "Bgha" ("Bgha a' hko"). If the feast is held annually, it occurs in April or May; but the priestess may fix a time at her pleasure when she feels that the "Bgha" should be honored and propitiated. Those required to attend this feast of the kindred are the full brothers and sisters of the priestess, her sons, daughters, and daughters' children; but her husband, brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, and their sons, together with her sons-in-law and the sons of her sons, are excluded and eat their feast with their own kindreds.

The eligible members of the family having assembled, the grandmother holds a pair of fowls, male and female, by their heads and says: "O Lord of the demons, we are offering to thee the flesh of fowls and pigs. Free us from all illness." After wringing the necks of the chickens, she orders their feathers to be burned off preparatory to cooking them with salt and chili only. Rice is also cooked. These viands are set out and the priestess eats a morsel, followed by her sons and each of the other relatives in the

1 [For description of ceremony, see p. 248ff, Cat. 116 - Anal

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

supply themselves with pieces of plantain leaf and in turn help themselves from each of the three leaves while praying: "O Lord of the great spirits, do thou, who carest for us, prevent all sickness and sorrow from approaching us. May we be protected from injury by sharp sticks of bamboo and wood, by the arrows and spears of our enemies, and from all evil that may befall us. Wilt thou be our shield and defense." Through a small bamboo tube the grandmother-priestess drinks a little liquor from the pot, as do her relatives in their turn. She then points a newly sprouted plantain leaf at the skull of the pig, which has been hung up over her mat, and repeats the last prayer. Then all drink a little more of the liquor and are ready to follow the example of the priestess in partaking of the feast.

The earthen pot, in which the pork has been cooked, is intended to remind the kindred that they are children of the earth; while the bamboo joints, in which some of the offerings have been prepared, serve to keep before their minds the temporary character of their bamboo houses and utensils.

CUSTOMS INCIDENTAL TO THE "BGHA" FEASTS

Certain customs and tabus incidental to the "Bgha" feasts should be noted. Unless all the members of the family are present at such a ceremony, except those excluded from the feast, the offerings are thought to be objectionable to the "Bgha." If a person absents himself from a feast that is being held to promote the recovery of a sick relative, he is suspected of desiring the continued illness or the death of the sick one. Or his absence may be interpreted as an effort to bring calamity upon some member of the family. Such charges are made against the member of a family who becomes a Christian and remains away from the ceremony. The others allege that he no longer retains his affection for his kindred and is willing to bring illness and disaster upon them by his absence, which angers the "Bgha."

While the feasts are in progress, no stranger is permitted to enter the family-room. When I first traveled in the hills, I noticed that as I passed through the corridor of a village-house some member of a family stood in the doorway of one or another of the family-rooms to prevent my entering. This seemed strange, in view of the fact that I was usually received with cordial hospitality. On inquiry I found that the guarding of the door was to keep me from

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

unwittingly rendering their offerings futile. The advantage of the village guest-room then became clear to me. There I and other strangers could be entertained, and there the men who were ineligible to attend the feast of the family they had married into could congregate and visit, while their relatives were participating in the "Bgha" ceremony.

The idea of sacrifice is undoubtedly at the root of the "Bgha" feasts. According to the explanation of an old Karen woman, when one has offended the family spirit or, as the people say, has "hit the 'Bgha'" ("pgha ba Bgha"), one has fallen on the worst possible fate; for the demon will seek to devour the life principle ("k' la") of the unfortunate one, unless propitiated by offerings of chicken and pork. The "Bgha" is supposed to be satisfied with the "k' la" of these sacrifices, which constitute the best eating within the knowledge of the Karen people. Even those who no longer fear their "Bgha" will call in the members of their family and make a feast, principally on account of their own enjoyment of it. In such cases they add the spices for a curry, instead of cooking the meat with only salt and chili. The Karen, especially those of Shwegyin, declare that fornication, adultery, and incest anger the family spirits more than any other offenses. Such acts of immorality incite the "Bgha" to curse the soil, blight the crops, and send epidemics among the people. Once aroused, a "Bgha" will assume the form of a tiger or snake and wait for its victims, in order to destroy the "k'las" of the offenders and other inhabitants of their village. In case of a poor season and bad crops the elders become suspicious and sometimes succeed in scaring young persons into a confession of their secret sins. Unusual offerings are required to appease the offended demon, these being—according to one list in my possession—first, a buffalo, next, an ox, and finally, a chicken and a pig. All the family must unite in an earnest prayer that these offerings may prove acceptable to the "Bgha" and avert any further calamities from them. The great fear of blighted crops, and of other evils not less feared because unknown, tends to keep the Karen a chaste people, which they certainly are for the most part.[2]

The traditional explanation of the use of the chicken bones and the pig's gall-bladder in divination, and of pork and fowls in the family feasts, is that the chickens and pigs ate most of the fragments of the God-given book which the white brother delivered to

[2] See pp. 30, 139, 142, 148, 192, 225, 288.

19: Marshall M-S (ca. 1918) 1922 AFI Burma
Karen AFI

781
415
177

I remember being asked by a family, who had become Christians and were discarding the old ways, to destroy these utensils for them. They had not yet freed themselves of their fears sufficiently to perform an act that seemed to them like desecration.

177
771
776

Families who are about to adopt Burmese customs or to accept Christianity, generally dispose of all their pigs and fowls, with the

[415]

UTENSILS FOR THE SACRED "BGHA" FEAST OF A PWO KAREN FAMILY, BASSEIN DISTRICT.

exception of two or three of the latter and one of the former. When the time for a feast arrives, they make the usual preparations; but before the pig is killed, one of the elders will put his hand on its side and inform the "Mū xa" that the family are about to make their last offering and beg the demons to dismiss them and allow them to go in peace. This rite is called "Ta aw-k' tew kwi Bgha" literally, "eating to finish the 'Bgha'." The statement that this is the final offering is repeated in every address to the spirit uttered during the course of the feast. If the parents of the head of the family are living, they construct a little house and put into it offer-

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

177
771
796

ings of rice and meat in order to satisfy the appetite of the "Bgha." Families who thus terminate their relations with their special divinities, observe the tabu of not keeping pigs and fowls again for a period of three years. Not all families who become Christians observe this rite, for many times they make the transition by simply forsaking the "Bgha" once for all.